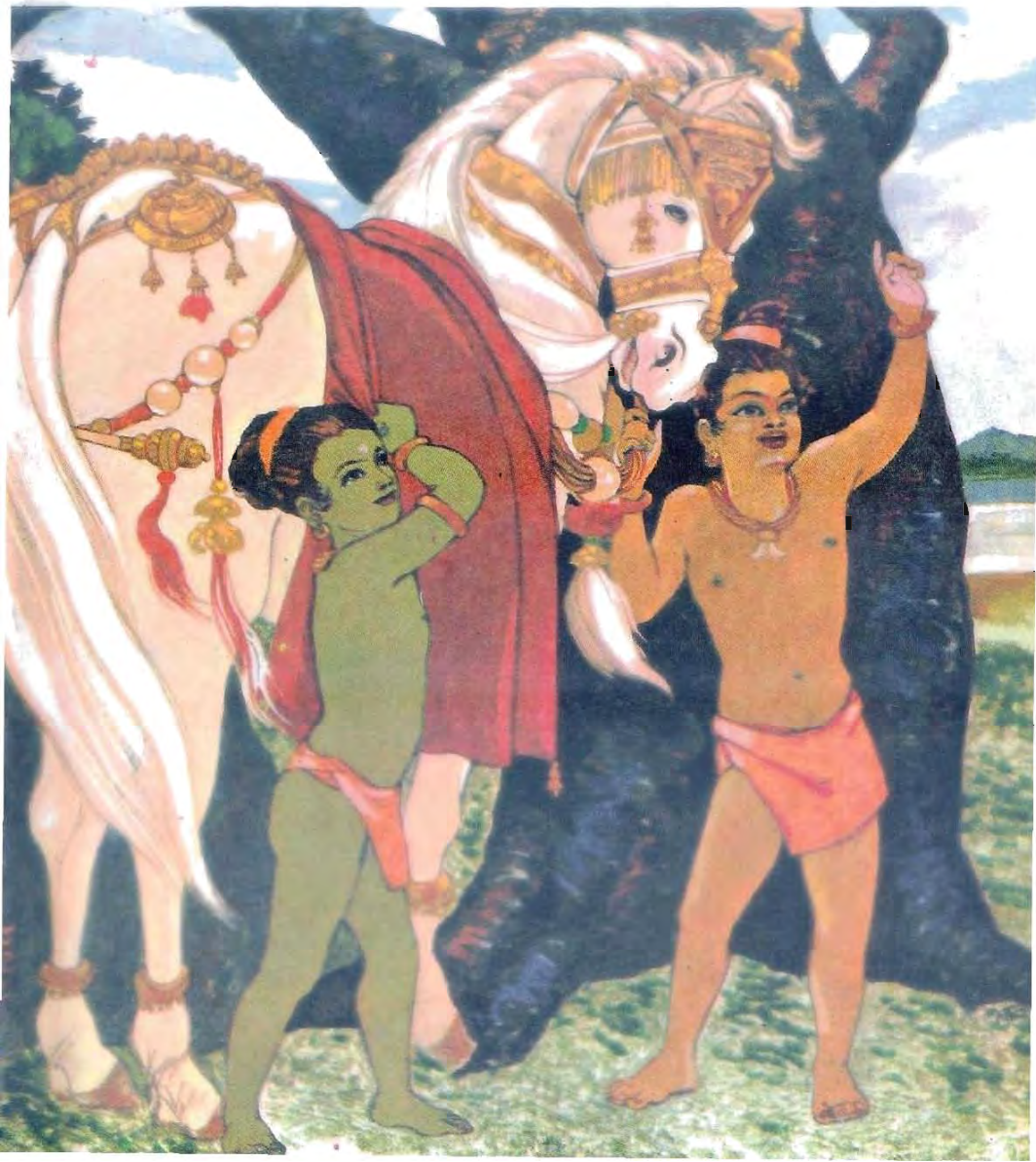




STORIES OF VALOUR

Rajendra Awasthy



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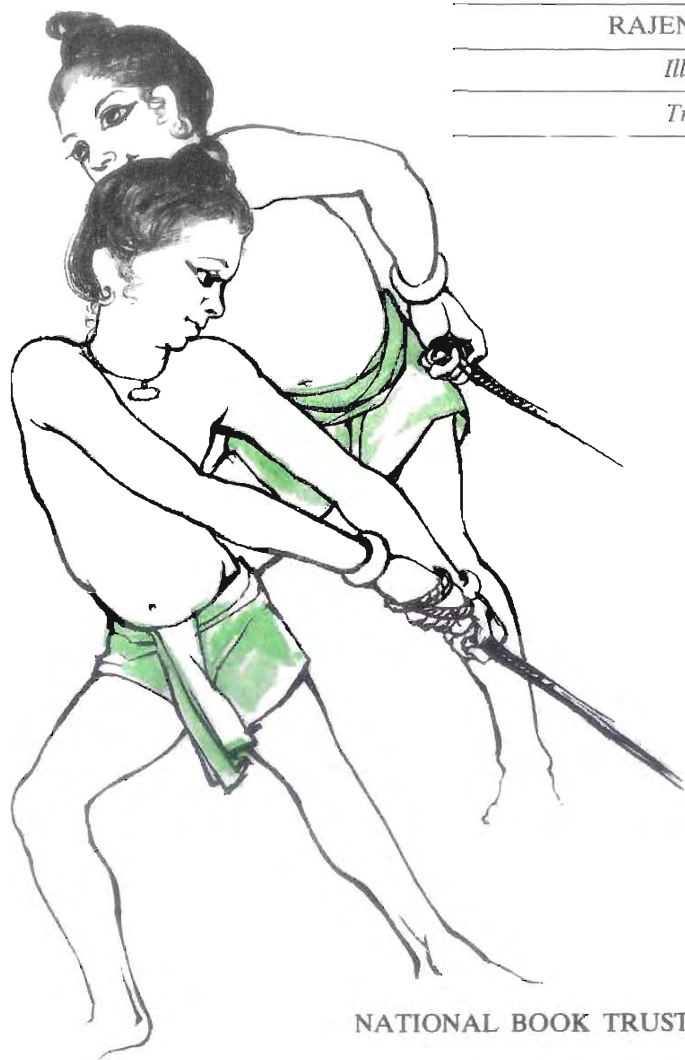
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STORIES OF VALOUR

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THE PILGRIMS



Shravan gave his blind old parents dinner and made their beds. When they were lying down, he began as usual to massage his father's feet. "Some pilgrims have just arrived from the South," he remarked. "They are visiting all the holy places. They sang beautiful hymns as they passed through our village. There were even a few cripples among them."

The old man heaved a deep sigh. "They are very fortunate. We too wanted to go on pilgrimage but God took away our eyesight."

"Why do you blame God?" rebuked the old woman. "You should count your blessings! We have such a good son. He is our eyes."

Shravan did not say a word but he decided to fulfil his parents' greatest wish. After all, it was a son's duty to take his parents on pilgrimage. But he kept his thoughts to himself. He did not even tell his wife about his decision because he knew that she would disapprove.

As was the custom in those days, Shravan had been married while still a child. He had repeatedly told his wife that she should cherish his parents for his sake. But she was a double-faced woman. In front of Shravan she looked after the old couple very lovingly but as soon as his back was turned she became insolent. The old couple, however, never complained to their son. On the contrary, they always praised their daughter-in-law.

Shravan's mind was preoccupied with plans for the journey. How pleased his parents would be when he would tell them that he was taking them on pilgrimage. They would protest and say they did not want to trouble him but he



would get round them.

The following morning, after he had finished his work, Shrivani went to a carpenter who lived nearby. The carpenter was pleased to see him, for Shrivani's devotion to his parents had endeared him to the entire village.

"What can I do for you, son?" asked the carpenter.

Shrivani replied, "Uncle, please make me a *kanvar*—a beam with baskets slung on either side."

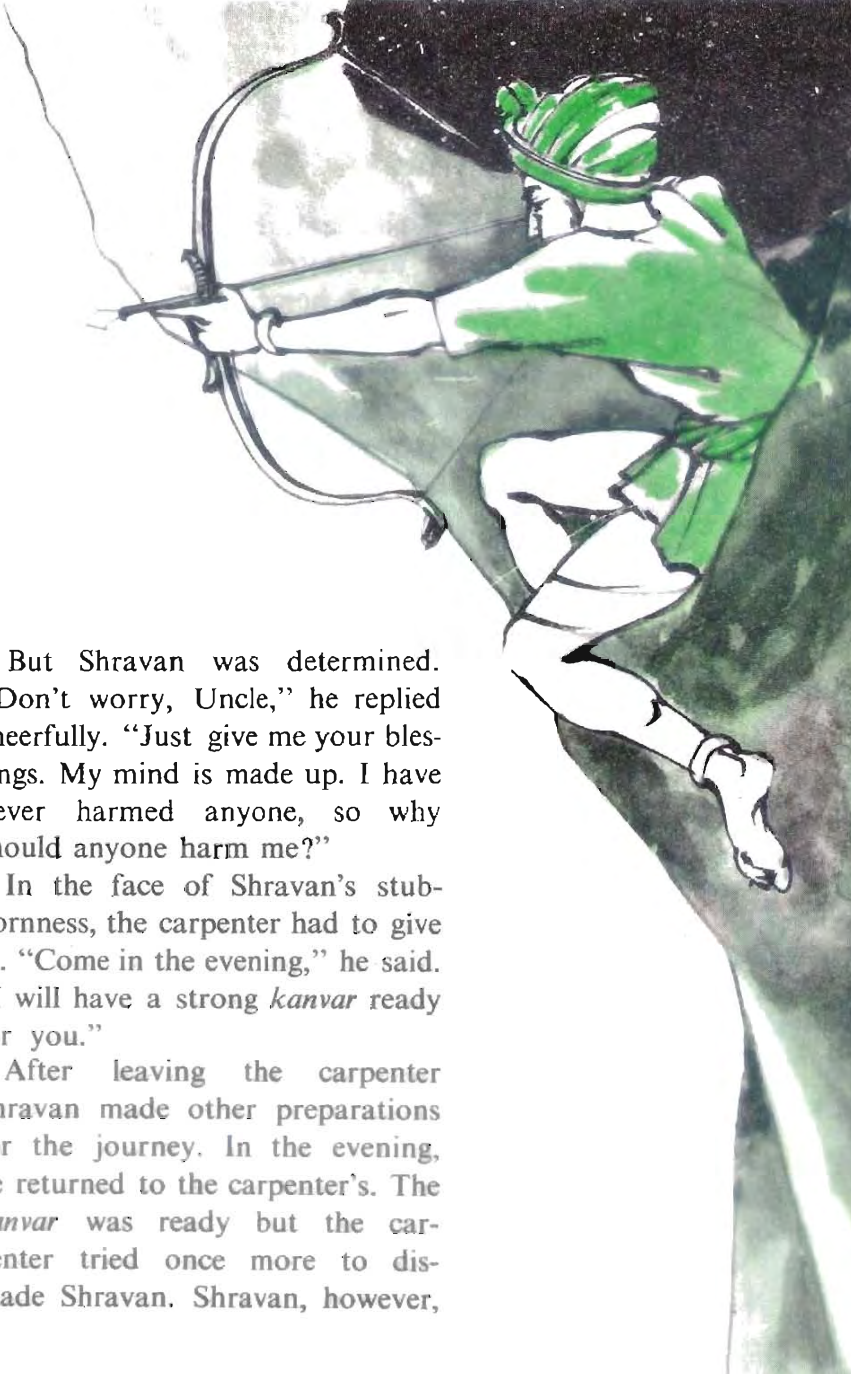
"What on earth for?" the carpenter asked with surprise.

"What will you do with it?"

"I will carry my parents in it," Shrivani answered.

"They are very keen to go on pilgrimage but are blind and helpless."

"Listen to me, son," said the carpenter. "You are still very young and do not realise the difficulties of the journey you are planning. You will have to cross mountains, rivers and dense forests. On the way there will be wild animals and poisonous snakes. How will you face all these dangers?"



But Shravan was determined. "Don't worry, Uncle," he replied cheerfully. "Just give me your blessings. My mind is made up. I have never harmed anyone, so why should anyone harm me?"

In the face of Shravan's stubbornness, the carpenter had to give in. "Come in the evening," he said. "I will have a strong *kanvar* ready for you."

After leaving the carpenter Shravan made other preparations for the journey. In the evening, he returned to the carpenter's. The *kanvar* was ready but the carpenter tried once more to dissuade Shravan. Shravan, however,



remained adamant. He took leave of the carpenter and carrying the *kanvar* on his shoulders went home.

On reaching his house, Shraavan told his wife and parents of his plans. His parents tried to dissuade him, but Shraavan would not budge from his resolve. "Don't worry," he assured them. "I've arranged everything."

The following morning, Shraavan woke up early and helped his parents to get ready. He settled them in the baskets and set off with the *kanvar* on his shoulders. The entire village came to see them off. They showered praises and blessings on Shraavan.

Slowly the day advanced. The streets were jammed with chariots. There was dust and commotion everywhere. Unconcerned, Shraavan continued on his way. People stopped to stare at him. A mere lad carrying an old blind couple on his young shoulders! Many were moved to tears.

The days turned into weeks and the weeks into months. Shraavan travelled during the day and rested at night. One day, he found himself in a dense forest. Far from being scared he was enchanted. Around him birds sang melodiously and in the distance a lion roared; a herd of frightened deer suddenly bounded across the wood and rabbits scurried into their holes. The forest hummed with life. Shraavan

continued boldly on his way.

Night fell and the forest was silent. Birds slumbered in their nests, beasts in their lairs. But Shravan was wide awake. He leant against the trunk of a tree, lost in thought. Suddenly his father awoke and asked for water.

Shravan picked up the pitcher. There was not a drop of water in it. Turning to his father he said, "The pitcher is empty. I'll go and fill it. There must be a pond or stream nearby."

"Don't go out in the dark," his father said. But Shravan insisted. He could not let his father go thirsty. He picked up the pitcher and set out in search of water.

The breeze turned cool and humid. Shravan realised that he must be near a stretch of water. A little distance away he heard the babbling of a stream. He ran towards it and dipped the pitcher in the water. As the pitcher began to fill, it made a gurgling sound.

All of a sudden an arrow whizzed past and struck Shravan straight in the chest. The forest echoed with his cry



of anguish. The arrow had been shot by King Dashrath. He had mistaken the gurgling sound for an elephant drinking and, without a moment's pause, had discharged his arrow.

The King was sitting on a branch when he heard the scream. He jumped down and ran towards the stream. On the ground lay a handsome youth, gasping for breath, the arrow deeply embedded in his chest. King Dashrath was overcome with remorse. The ground seemed to sway before his eyes.

Shravan groaned with pain and called for his parents. Dashrath knelt down and taking Shravan's head in his lap, gently drew out the arrow from his chest. Blood immediately began to spurt from his wound. Tearfully Dashrath said, "I have committed a grave sin. Please forgive me! I mistook you for an elephant."

Shravan spoke with difficulty, "You look like a king. Just do me a small favour. My parents are in this forest and I was taking some water for them. Their throats must be parched by now. Give them some water to drink."

Slowly Shravan told the whole story to Dashrath. "Why did such a gentle boy, such a devoted and dutiful son, have to meet his death at my hands?" King Dashrath reproached himself.

"Don't waste any more time," urged Shravan. "Take the water quickly." These were the last words Shravan spoke before he died.

Dashrath lifted Shravan's body on his shoulder, took the pitcher in his hand and set off to look for Shravan's parents.

At last he saw someone seated under a tree. On hearing footsteps, Shravan's parents called out, "You have taken very long, son. We were worried that you may have met with some accident. Give us a drink quickly. We are dying of thirst."

Dashrath's heart thumped loudly. He hung his head in shame. How could he break the news of Shravan's death to his parents? With shaking hands, he gave the pitcher to Shravan's father. The old man said, "Why don't you speak, son? What's the matter?" Then suddenly suspicious, "You are Shravan, aren't you?" he asked.

The old woman now spoke, "Why don't you speak up, son? You usually call out to me as you draw near. What is wrong today? If you don't speak, we will not take a sip of water."

What was Dashrath to do? Remorsefully he said, "I am also your son. My name is Dashrath. Your Shravan..." The words stuck in his throat.

The old woman screamed, "Speak up. What has happened to our Shravan?"

The King took courage in both hands and told them of Shravan's death.

The old couple began to cry. The forest trembled with their wailing. Dashrath stood before them, his head bowed like a sinner craving pardon. He did not know how to console the old couple. At last he said, "Come with me and I will look after you. From today, you should consider me as your son."

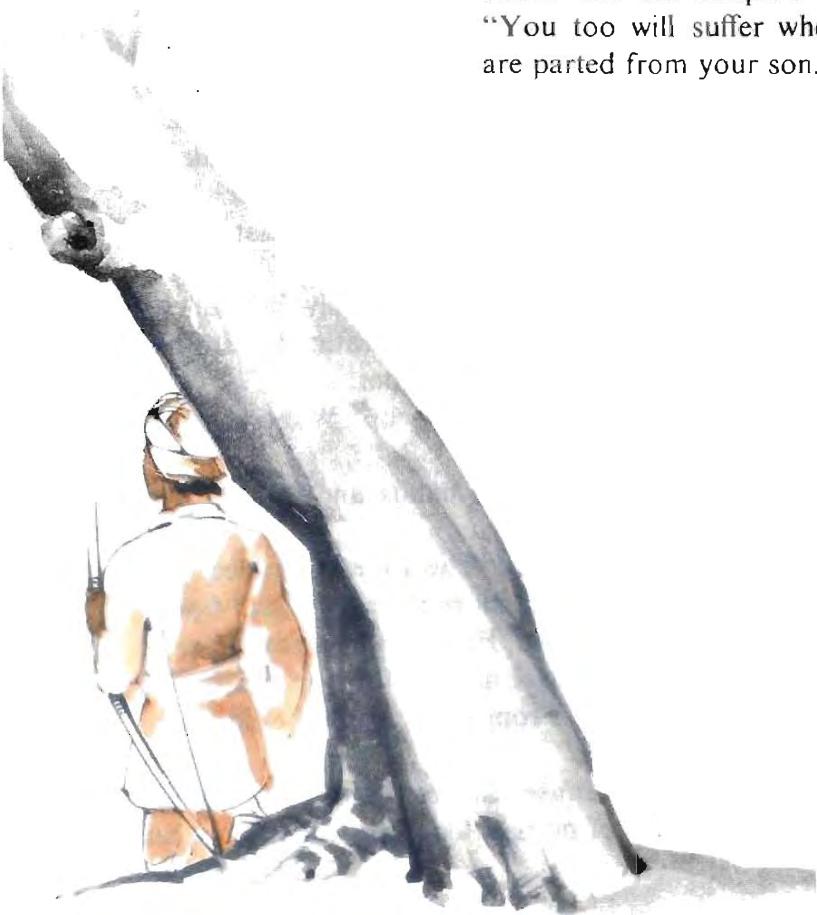
But the old couple refused to be comforted. "Without Shravan our life is of no use. You too will suffer when

you are parted from your son."

Dashrath trembled at these words of doom.

Shravan's parents died of grief.

Years later, when his son Rama went away to the forest, the grief-stricken Dashrath recalled the old couple's words, "You too will suffer when you are parted from your son."



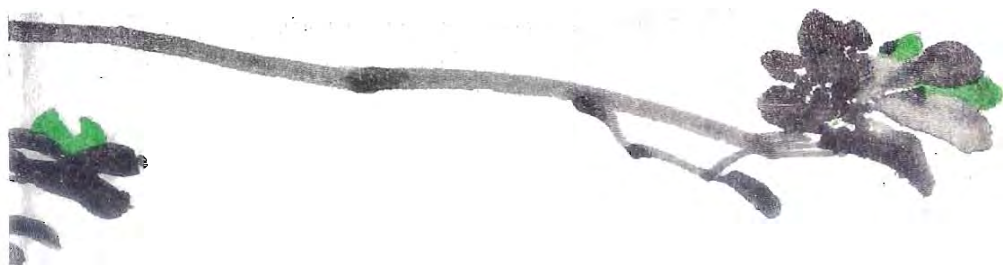
AN OFFERING TO THE GURU

Long, long ago the Bhils had a valiant king, Hiranyadhanu, who was greatly respected by many Kshatriya kings. His only son Eklavya was, like him, courageous and diligent. When he undertook a task he persevered till he had accomplished it.

One day when







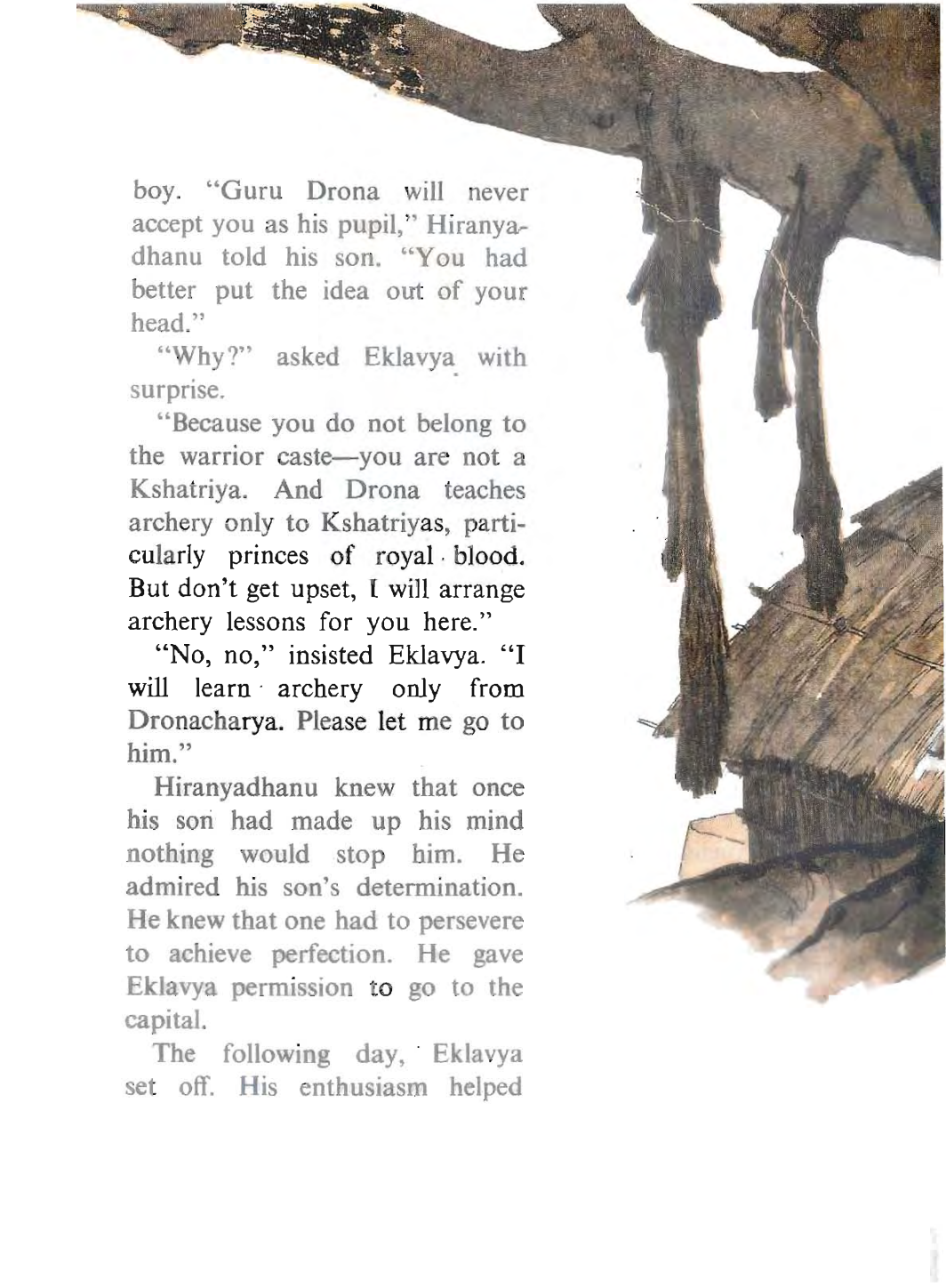
Eklavya was wandering alone in the forest he came across a prince who was out hunting. Eklavya watched the prince shoot with amazing accuracy. One arrow after another hit the target. "How wonderful it would be if I could shoot as well as the prince," he thought. "Then I would be the greatest hunter in the world." Eklavya went up to the prince. "Who taught you archery? Who is your guru?" he asked.

The prince was annoyed at the interruption. "Guru Dronacharya," he answered somewhat sharply. Then the prince turned and walked away arrogantly. Although Eklavya did not like the prince's haughty manner he did not lose his temper. He was busy thinking, "If I were trained by Dronacharya, I too would become a champion archer."

On reaching home, Eklavya asked his father about Guru Dronacharya. "Dronacharya lives in the capital and teaches archery to Emperor Dhritarashtra's - sons," Hiranyadhanu answered. And added, "Son, Dronacharya is the world's greatest archer."

Eklavya was fired with enthusiasm. "Father, I too shall learn archery from Guru Dronacharya," he said.

Hiranyadhanu was taken aback. He knew that this was not possible, for Guru Drona would never teach a Bhil



boy. "Guru Drona will never accept you as his pupil," Hiranyadhanu told his son. "You had better put the idea out of your head."

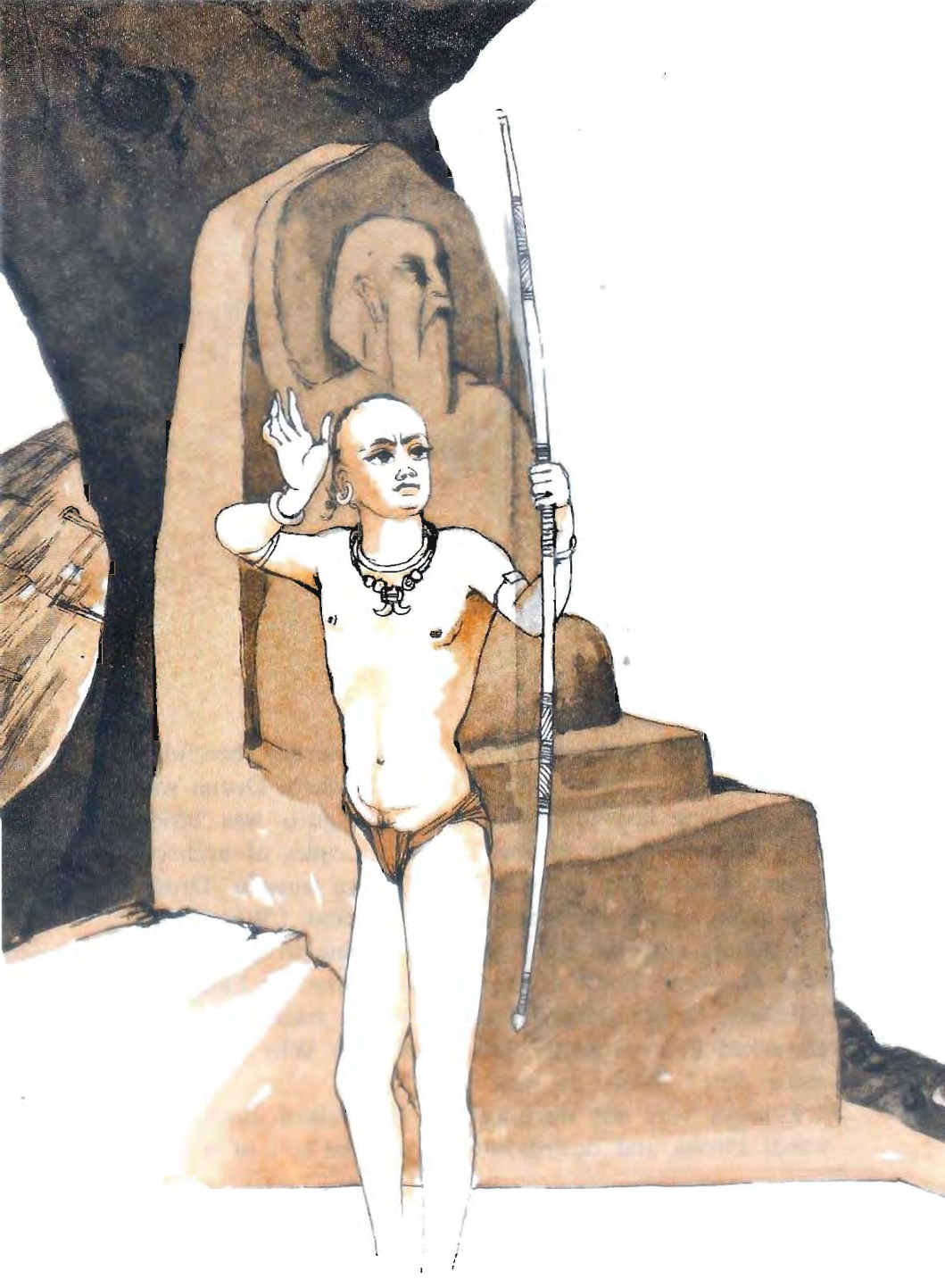
"Why?" asked Eklavya with surprise.

"Because you do not belong to the warrior caste—you are not a Kshatriya. And Drona teaches archery only to Kshatriyas, particularly princes of royal blood. But don't get upset, I will arrange archery lessons for you here."

"No, no," insisted Eklavya. "I will learn archery only from Dronacharya. Please let me go to him."

Hiranyadhanu knew that once his son had made up his mind nothing would stop him. He admired his son's determination. He knew that one had to persevere to achieve perfection. He gave Eklavya permission to go to the capital.

The following day, Eklavya set off. His enthusiasm helped





him to endure the boredom of the long journey cheerfully. On reaching the capital, Eklavya asked where Drona was and at long last found his hut. The guru was inside, busy instructing the princes in the principles of archery. When he saw the dark-skinned Eklavya outside, Drona was taken aback. The princes were shocked. "Why didn't the guards stop the Bhil boy from coming to the door?" they wondered. Some of them were amazed at Eklavya's boldness. Drona realised that this was a tricky situation. He asked Eklavya gently, "Who are you? Why have you come here? What do you want?"

Eklavya was not disconcerted. He walked slowly towards Drona and bowed low. "I am the son of a Bhil

king, Hiranyadhanu. My name is Eklavya," he replied. "I would like to learn archery from you. Kindly accept me as your pupil."

Eklavya had not even completed his sentence when the princes burst out laughing. Eklavya ignored their mockery. Although his face flushed with anger, he did not utter a word, but looked pleadingly at Drona. Drona regarded Eklavya gravely and replied, "Prince of the Bhils, I cannot



accept you as my pupil. I teach only Kshatriyas. You must go back home."

Eklavya had anticipated this reply. But he had been confident that he would be able to make Drona change his mind. He said in a broken voice, "I have vowed that I would learn archery from you and no one else. If I cannot fulfil my vow, I will not return home. Please accept me as your pupil." Even then Drona turned down Eklavya's request. With a heavy heart Eklavya retraced his steps. But he was still not willing to accept defeat. The mockery of the sons of Kshatriyas rang in his ears. Their scornful laughter had touched him on the raw. His father's words came back to him but he could not go back on his pledge. Clenching his fist he made a firm resolve.

Eklavya decided to live in the forest and not return home. He made an earthen statue of Drona and built a hut near it. He lived there alone and practised archery. From break of dawn till dusk he practised shooting at a target. The sun rose and the sun set. Nights followed days. The seasons came and went. The scorching heat of the day did not deter him, nor did spring distract him from his aim. Hard practice and endless perseverance made Eklavya an expert archer.

One day as Eklavya stood taking aim in front of his earthen guru, one hand holding the bow and the other pulling back the bow-string to his ear, a dog appeared and began to bark. The noise disturbed Eklavya. He tried to shoo it away but the dog would not go. Eklavya took aim and pierced the cur's mouth with a quick succession of arrows. It ran away whining piteously.

The dog belonged to the Kaurava and Pandava princes

who had come to the forest to hunt. When they saw what had happened, they could hardly believe their eyes. It was clear that only an expert could have sealed the dog's mouth so effectively. So far Arjuna had been considered the world's best archer. But now there was someone who appeared to be far better than him. The princes took their dog and went to Dronacharya.

Even Dronacharya gasped with amazement at the sight of the dog. He could not help in his heart of hearts from praising the unknown archer who had so skilfully closed the dog's mouth. Accompanied by the princes, he set out to look for him. They soon met Eklavya. Drona immediately recognised him. Going up to Eklavya he asked affectionately, "Son, you have become a very good archer. Who is your guru?"

"The respected Dronacharya," Eklavya answered politely.

"Dronacharya?" the princes and Dronacharya chorused in surprise.

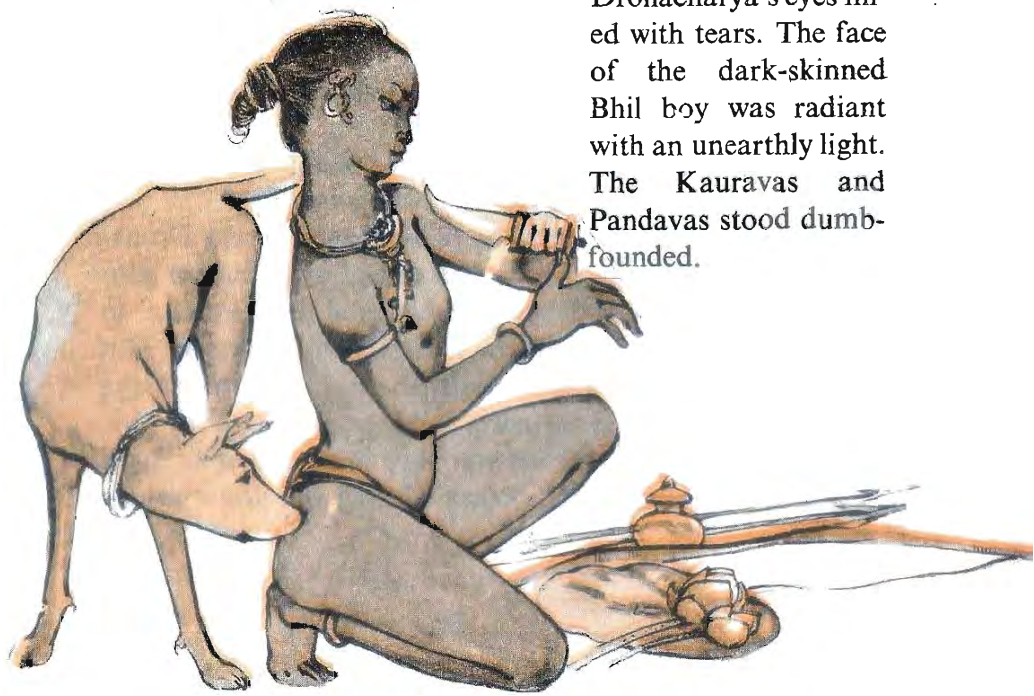
"Yes, Dronacharya." And Eklavya pointed to the statue. Then he told Dronacharya the whole story.

"I am very pleased at your perseverance," said Dronacharya. He was sorry that he had turned away such a promising pupil. Suddenly he remembered his promise to Arjuna that no one would ever excel him in archery. But Eklavya was much more skilled than Arjuna. Dronacharya was greatly troubled. Then a solution occurred to him. He said to Eklavya, "Since you have made me your guru, I accept you as my pupil. What offering will you make to me?"

"Whatever you order," Eklavya replied bowing his head.

"Give me the thumb of your right hand," demanded Dronacharya.

For a moment, everyone was stunned. Without hesitation, Eklavya chopped off his right thumb and offered it to Dronacharya. Overcome by this devotion, Dronacharya's eyes filled with tears. The face of the dark-skinned Bhil boy was radiant with an unearthly light. The Kauravas and Pandavas stood dumbfounded.







KRISHNA'S CHILDHOOD

It was midnight on the eighth of the month of *Bhadra-pada*. It was pitch dark outside and the sky was heavily overcast. Lightning flashed and thunder shook the earth.

The people of Mathura slept peacefully in their homes. Who would ever venture out on such a night! Only Kansa, the King of Mathura, tossed restlessly in bed. Since

he had heard the prophecy that his sister's eighth child would destroy him, all desire for food or sleep had deserted him. He had thrown his sister, Devaki, and her husband, Vasudeva, into a dungeon. In the cell, Devaki had borne seven children and each one of them had been murdered at birth, for Kansa did not want to take any chances. Now Devaki was expecting her eighth child.

Kansa was a tyrant. He had ascended the throne by throwing his father, King Ugrasena, into prison. His hands were bloody with countless murders and untold atrocities. His subjects were wretched and miserable. "I'll meet my death at the hands of my own sister's child," the words echoed in Kansa's mind and filled him with anxiety.

At midnight, when the star Rohini was in the ascendant, Devaki's eighth child, Krishna, was born. The cell was suddenly flooded with a heavenly light. Both Devaki and Vasudeva realised that this was no ordinary baby, this was the child who would put an end to Kansa. They had already decided that they must somehow prevent the child from falling into the King's hands. Vasudeva quietly picked up the boy and put him in a basket. The doors of the dungeon opened mysteriously. The guards were sound asleep. Vasudeva escaped stealthily. No one saw him leave.

On that dark stormy night when the whole of Mathura slept soundly, Vasudeva set out with a basket on his head.



It was raining cats and dogs. Visibility was very poor. The Jamuna was in flood. But when Vasudeva reached the river-bank, to his amazement, the waters receded and he was able to cross over and proceed to Gokul.

Gokul was still and silent; not a soul stirred. Vasudeva went to the house of his friend Nanda. Nanda's wife, Yashoda, had just given birth to a girl. Nanda picked up the girl and put her in Vasudeva's basket. Then he took Krishna and laid him in his daughter's cot. Picking up the basket, Vasudeva returned stealthily to Mathura. The Jamuna waters were still at low ebb, as if waiting for his return. As soon as Vasudeva crossed over and set foot in Mathura, the river flooded its banks again.

Marvelling at this miraculous happening, Vasudeva arrived back at the dungeon. The doors were still open and the guards were still sound asleep. As Vasudeva



entered, the doors closed mysteriously and no one was any the wiser.

The little girl began to cry as soon as she was put in Devaki's lap. The guards awoke with a start. "Devaki's eighth child has been born!" they cried. There was an uproar in the dungeon.

A contingent of soldiers rushed to break the news to Kansa. Kansa was walking about restlessly in his bedroom. Every now and then he would glance anxiously towards the door; he was awaiting news of his murderer's birth. Just then the soldiers rushed up pell-mell and cried breathlessly, "Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Your sister has given birth to a daughter!"

Kansa immediately pulled out his sword and rushed barefoot to the dungeon. Seeing Kansa's face blazing with anger, the gaolers opened the door and stood aside. Kansa snatched the new-born babe from Devaki's lap. As he was about to dash her on a stone the child slipped out of his grasp and disappearing skywards said, "Sinner Kansa, the one who is going to kill you is alive!"

Kansa flew into a rage. He issued orders that every child born in Braj that night should be immediately destroyed, and sent out men and women in all directions to carry out his instructions. Among them was one Putana who had the ability to change form.

The assassins sent out by Kansa combed the kingdom and murdered every new-born child. Wails rose from every home.

Putana killed many innocent babies. One day she entered Nanda's house in disguise. The sixth day of the

child's birth was being celebrated. Pretending to fondle him, Putana picked up the boy and began to nurse him. Putana had coated her breasts with deadly poison so that as soon as the child put his lips to them, he would immediately die. But the tables were turned on her with a vengeance. Krishna sucked so hard that screaming with unbearable pain Putana fell down and died. Her disguise was immediately exposed.

When he heard of Putana's death, Kansa was extremely agitated for he had great faith in her. Then he sent her brother Bakasura to kill Krishna. But he too met the same fate as his sister. His brother Aghasura was also sent. He also lost his life at the child Krishna's hands.

Kansa continued to hatch murderous plots. He tried various means to put an end to Krishna but failed every time.

The years passed and Krishna grew up. He learnt to play the flute and grazed his cattle with the other cowherds.

Kaliya, a large poisonous serpent, lived in the Jamuna with his family. The waters had become so tainted with venom that even along the banks, trees and plants laden with flowers withered and died. Any man or beast that drank a mouthful of these poisoned waters instantly fell ill. Krishna heard of this and decided to get rid of the snake.

One day Krishna was playing with his cowherd friends on the banks of the Jamuna. Suddenly their ball rolled into the water. Krishna immediately jumped in after it. His playmates panicked. "Help! Help!" they began to scream. Their parents rushed up. Nanda and Yashoda heard the

news and they too hurried to the river-bank. They looked around, heart in mouth. There was no sign of Krishna. When Kaliya saw Krishna he sprang at him angrily. Krishna was on his guard and when the serpent came close, he jumped onto his hood. But Kaliya had hundreds of hoods and these he immediately spread out. He then tried to sting Krishna. Krishna, however, began rapidly stamping his tiny feet on the hoods, and the snake, enraged with pain, was





forced out of the river.

It was a sight worth seeing! Little Krishna dancing on the many-hooded Kaliya and merrily playing his flute!

The people of Braj were thrilled. But poor Kaliya writhed in agony and blood flowed from his hoods. His wives could not bear to see his plight. With folded hands they begged Krishna to show mercy. "If Kaliya leaves the Jamuna at once and goes to the isle of Rāmnak, I will spare him," said Krishna, taking pity on them. Kaliya agreed and immediately departed with his family. The adventure won Krishna many admirers. This story of Krishna's bravery is known as *Kaliya-mardan* or 'the crushing of Kaliya'.

Krishna's childhood was full of such incidents; he was brave and fearless. His flute was touched with such magic that cattle stopped grazing and housewives dropped their housework to hear him play. The milkmaids were very fond of him and often played pranks on him. Sometimes they hid his flute; sometimes his cap of peacock feathers. Krishna returned prank for prank. Sometimes he stole their freshly churned butter; sometimes he smashed their waterpitchers. Thus the days passed pleasantly in Braj.

One day Krishna noticed that preparations for some festival were afoot. Nanda told Krishna that the festival



was in honour of Indra. "Indra is the Lord of the clouds," explained Nanda. "He is the giver of the rains. The rains water our fields and make the crops grow. So we hold a festival every year and offer sacrifices to Indra."

This did not make much sense to Krishna. "But *Baba*," he said, "it is natural for clouds to produce rain. What has Indra to do with it? Instead of worshipping Indra we should worship Mount Govardhan. It is only when the clouds hit the mountain that they shed their water. The credit shouldn't go to Indra."

Krishna's arguments were convincing. The people decided to worship Mount Govardhan from that day. The young cowherds climbed the roofs of their homes to tender offerings to the mountain.

Indra was furious. He began a terrible downpour and in a short time the countryside was flooded. Greatly troubled, people rushed to Krishna and appealed for help. Krishna laughed and raised the entire mountain with his little finger. The whole village took shelter under it and was saved from the flood.

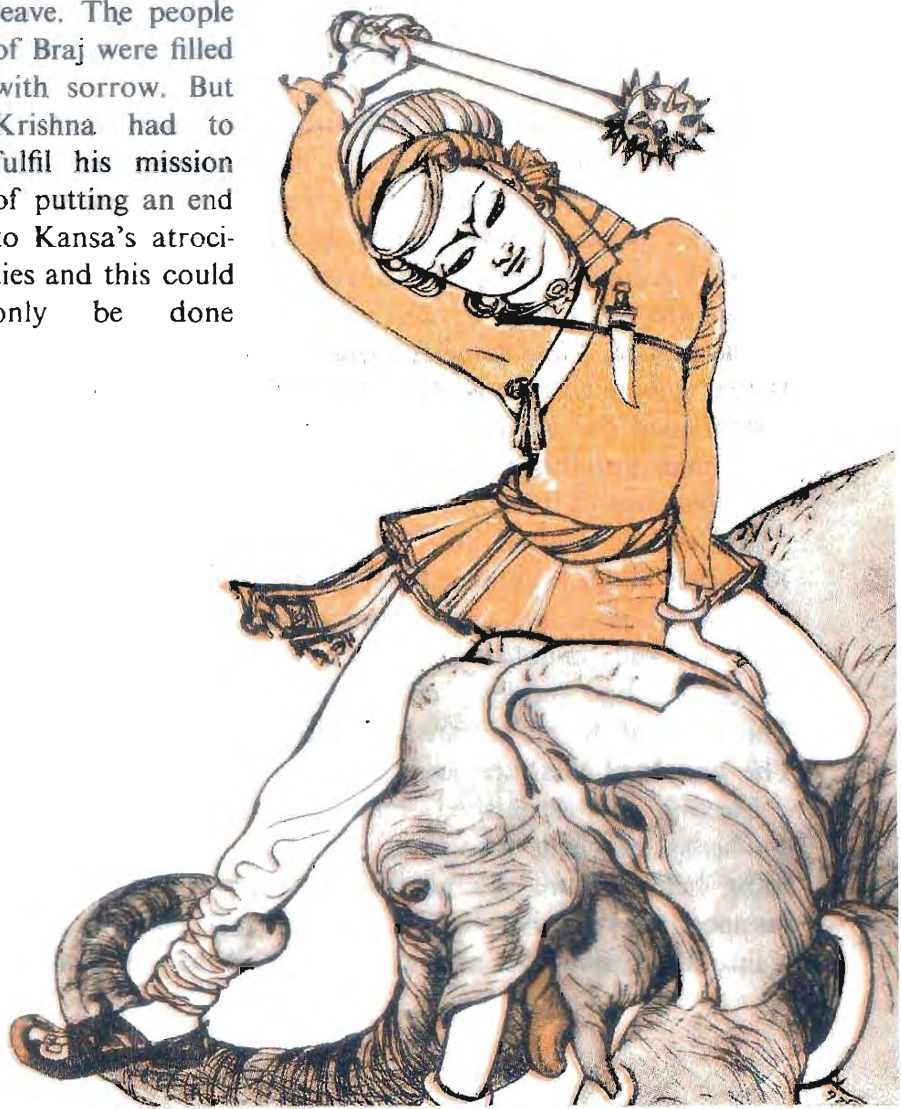
For seven days Krishna held the mountain on his little finger. Ultimately Indra had to admit defeat. His pride was humbled. Everyone in Braj began to sing Krishna's praises. They gave him the title *Govardhandhari*—the upholder of Mount Govardhan.

Kansa did not give up his attempt to put Krishna and his elder brother, Balarama, to death. He sent the demons Arishtasura, Keshi and Vyomasura on this task but they all met their end at the hands of Krishna and Balarama.

It was proving difficult to kill Krishna and Balarama in

Braj. So Kansa hatched another plot. He organised a big festival at Mathura to which he invited the two brothers.

As soon as Krishna and Balarama received the invitation, they got ready to leave. The people of Braj were filled with sorrow. But Krishna had to fulfil his mission of putting an end to Kansa's atrocities and this could only be done



in Mathura. Explaining this to the villagers and the milkmaids Krishna, accompanied by Nanda, Balarama and some cowherd friends, set off for Mathura. The entire village came to see them off. They could not hold back their tears. The milkmaids would neither eat nor drink. Where there had once been song and laughter, the shadow of sorrow now cast its gloom.

When Krishna arrived at Mathura, large crowds gathered to see him, for Krishna's valour had become legendary.

Down the road Krishna met a woman whose back was bent and twisted. In her hands was a pot of sandalwood paste. Krishna went up to her and asked, "Who are you? Where are you going?"

She replied, "My name is Tribala. But because my back is bent people call me Kubja—hunchback. I am taking the sandalwood for King Kansa."

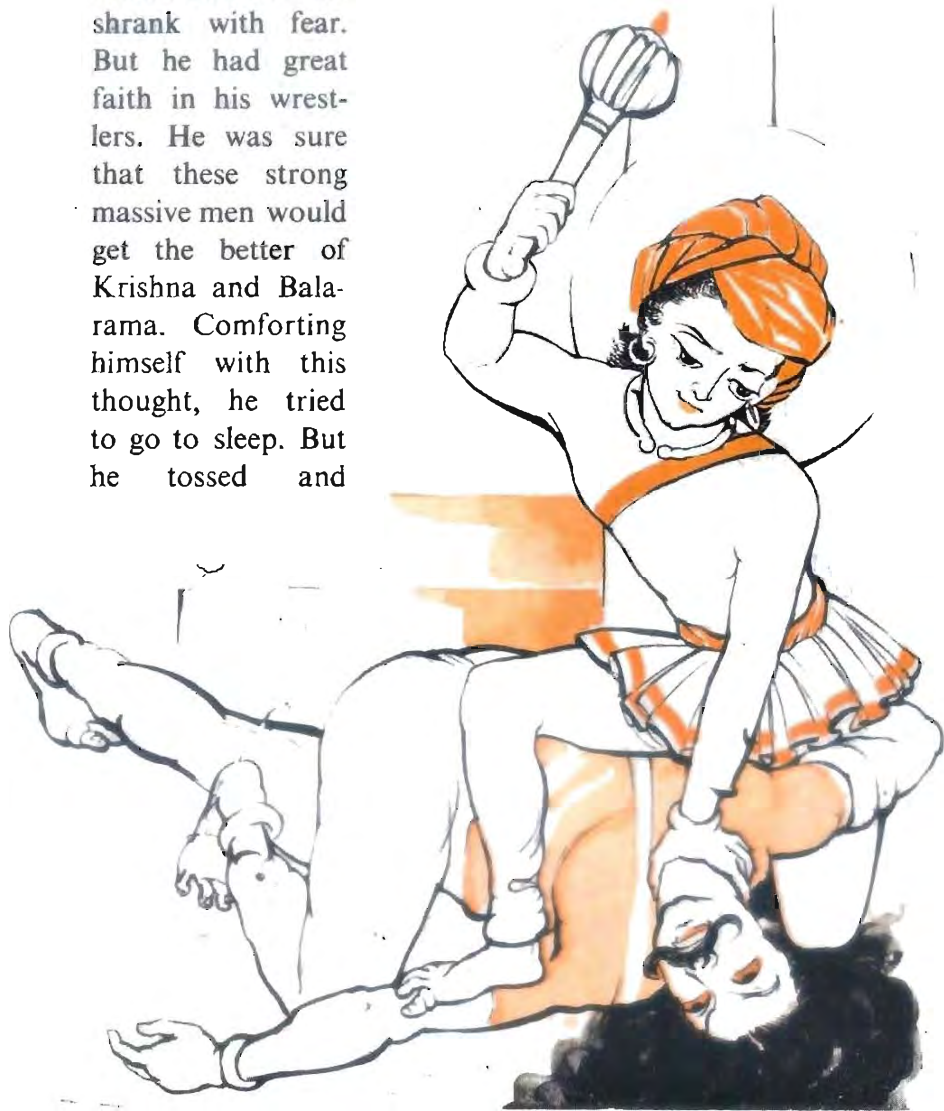
"Come, put this paste on me," said Krishna.

Kubja was a cheerful obliging person. She thought, "This will be a good joke," and rubbed all the paste on Krishna's body. Fragrance filled the air. Then to her amazement Krishna turned around and kicked a nerve in her leg. And lo and behold! Her back straightened! The ugly hunchback had suddenly changed into a beautiful woman! The news of Kubja's transformation spread like wildfire. The people of Mathura could hardly believe their ears.

Leaving the astonished hunchback, Krishna and the cowherds reached the spot where a bow contest was being held. Before the guards could stop him, Krishna snapped the massive bow and in a split second broke it into little pieces. He also vanquished all the demons who

were present.

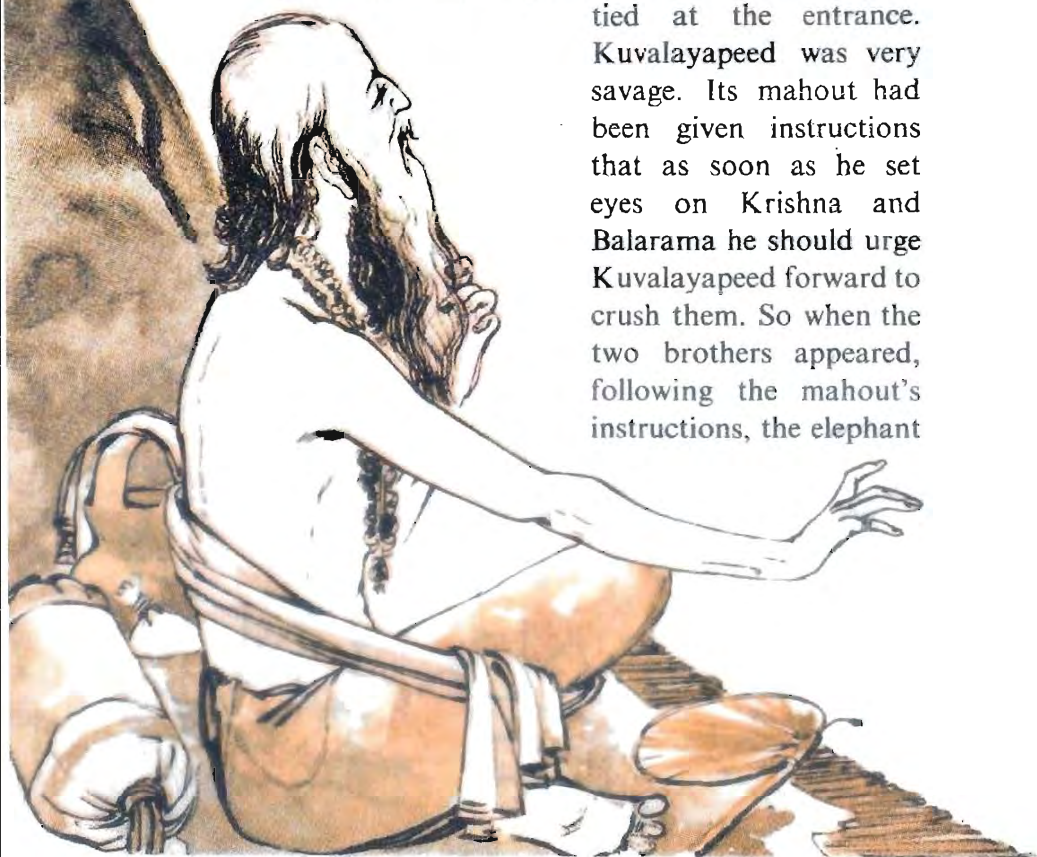
Kansa was informed of all these events and his heart shrank with fear. But he had great faith in his wrestlers. He was sure that these strong massive men would get the better of Krishna and Balarama. Comforting himself with this thought, he tried to go to sleep. But he tossed and



turned all night. At last he fell into an uneasy slumber. He dreamt that he was riding a donkey, his face had been blackened and that he had been exiled. This frightening ill-omen petrified Kansa. The following morning when he went to the festival, he was shaking with fear.

Wrestlers from distant lands had come to take part in the contest. Kansa's wrestlers were, of course, all champions but as an added precaution Kansa had an elephant named Kuvalayapeed

tied at the entrance. Kuvalayapeed was very savage. Its mahout had been given instructions that as soon as he set eyes on Krishna and Balarama he should urge Kuvalayapeed forward to crush them. So when the two brothers appeared, following the mahout's instructions, the elephant





charged. But the tables were turned on it.

Krishna first teased Kuvalayaped, then grabbing it by the trunk, he pulled so hard that the beast, trumpeting with pain, rolled on the ground and soon died.

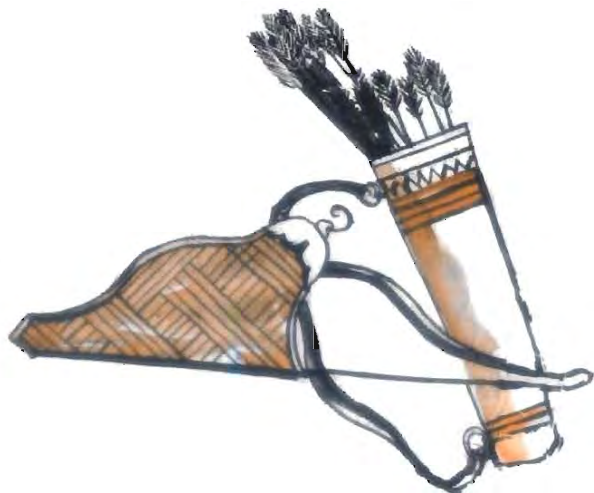
Inside the arena, drums were being beaten to excite the wrestlers and put them in the mood to fight. Krishna and Balarama walked in together. Kansa was immediately filled with foreboding. Chanura, one of his wrestlers, challenged Krishna to a bout, while Mushtika, another wrestler, challenged Balarama. The two brothers could never turn down a challenge. Slapping their thighs, they sprang into the arena. At first, people laughed at their daring. How could these children possibly take on champion wrestlers?

The women were filled with pity for the two boys and they began to chide Kansa. In the arena Krishna and

Balarama were tussling with wrestlers who were many times more powerful than they were. After a few bouts Krishna decided to finish off Chanura. He dealt him a mighty blow with his fist. Balarama did the same to Mushtika. Both the wrestlers fell down and died.

Kansa then sent Koota, Shalya and Toshal to wrestle with Krishna. They too met with the same fate. Filled with anxiety, Kansa pulled out his sword as a last resort. Krishna saw through his trick. Swift as lightning he leapt up to the throne and dragged Kansa down by his hair. He sat on him and went on hitting Kansa till he died. Then he placed his grandfather—Kansa's father, Ugrasena—on the throne. Krishna was then reunited with his parents, Vasudeva and Devaki.

There was great rejoicing throughout the land. Krishna's mission in Mathura had been accomplished. After spending a few days there, he and Balarama left for Avantipura (Ujjain) to study under Sage Sandipani.





THE BREAKTHROUGH

It was the twelfth day of the battle of Mahabharata. Arjuna had wounded Shakuni and Shakuni's two brothers, Vrishak and Achal, had been slain. Even the famous warrior Dronacharya had been helpless before Arjuna's skill. Gloom and despair prevailed among the Kauravas, while the Pandava camp was filled with hope and joy.

This setback made Duryodhana mad with rage. He began to chide Dronacharya. "You aren't doing your best against Arjuna," he said in front of all the soldiers. "You are partial to our Pandava enemies."

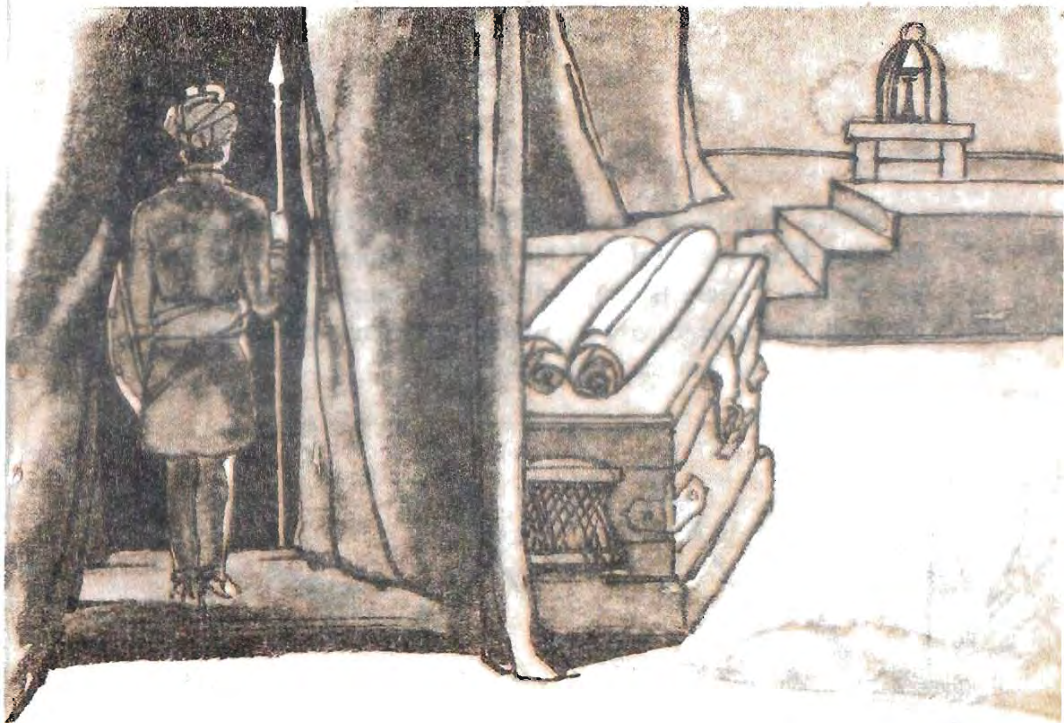
Dronacharya was stung by the insult. "I am fighting the Pandavas with all my strength and yet you question my loyalty," he replied sorrowfully. "I have repeatedly told you that if you separate Arjuna from the Pandavas, I will defeat them in a day. But as long as Arjuna is with them, the Pandavas can never be beaten."

Duryodhana kept Dronacharya's words in mind and made plans for the next day's battle.

So dawned the thirteenth day.

Both camps got ready for the struggle. Fighting fiercely Arjuna drifted to the southern side of the battlefield. Dronacharya immediately surrounded the Pandava army and





ordered the Kauravas to attack. The Pandavas faced the attack bravely but could not break out of the circle. Defeat stared them in the face and Arjuna was not at hand. Yudhishtira was filled with anxiety.

Suddenly he remembered Arjuna's son Abhimanyu and sent for him. Though only sixteen years old, Abhimanyu was brave and strong like his father and the Kauravas were scared of him. Abhimanyu obeyed the summons immediately. The boy's cheerful face lifted Yudhishtira's spirits. He put his problem to Abhimanyu. "Because we can't break out of the Kaurava circle we've already lost many brave soldiers," he explained. "Unless something is done soon, we will surely be defeated."

“Don’t worry!” reassured Abhimanyu. “I’ll smash through the Kaurava cordon.” He told Yudhishtira his plan but added, “There is only one hitch. Though I can break through the circle, once I am within the enemy lines I do not know how to extricate myself.”





“Break through the cordon,” said Yudhishtira. “We’ll be at your heels.” Bhima and others agreed.

Yudhishtira blessed Abhimanyu and wished him luck. Abhimanyu got into his chariot and rode towards the Kauravas. The Kaurava army was immediately alarmed. “There comes Abhimanyu!” they shouted with fear. A lion-cub matching its strength against a herd of elephants!

Attacking with the speed of lightning, Abhimanyu cut his way through the cordon. But he was so quick that the Pandavas were unable to follow him and he soon found himself alone within the enemy lines. But he was dauntless and more than a match for the Kauravas. He forged ahead slaying the Kauravas left and right. Like a flame he charred all that came within his range.

Duryodhana could not bear to see the slaughter of so many of his men and advanced to face Abhimanyu alone. Dronacharya sent other warriors to help him. But, by then, Abhimanyu had cornered Duryodhana and the Kauravas

were barely able to save his life.

Seeing Duryodhana in difficulties, the Kauravas worked out a clever plan. In the olden days even wars were fought honourably. Each soldier fought alone with his opponent. The Kauravas ignored this rule and with one accord fell upon the lone boy. Abhimanyu, however, turned and faced them fearlessly.

Dronacharya was filled with admiration. "Truly, no one can equal Abhimanyu in battle!" he said to the Kauravas.

This incensed Duryodhana. "You favour Abhimanyu because of your love for Arjuna," he said angrily. "What is so special about this sixteen-year-old boy? I can crush him in the palm of my hand." Duryodhana had conveniently forgotten his own recent plight at Abhimanyu's hands.

Duhshasana supported his brother. "I will soon put an end to this villain," he boasted. He pounced on Abhimanyu with all his force but Abhimanyu soon made him eat his words. He struck Duhshasana so hard that he fell down senseless in his chariot. The Kauravas were in despair, while the Pandava camp was jubilant.

Karna was furious. Stringing his bow, he attacked Abhimanyu. But Abhimanyu fought back with his usual valour. Letting loose a barrage of arrows, he killed many Kaurava soldiers. Even Karna was wounded. The Kaurava army was thrown into disarray. Alone a sixteen-year-old boy was holding the entire Kaurava army at bay. Dronacharya's plans had misfired. Even without Arjuna, Abhimanyu had succeeded in making the Kauravas cringe.

Finally Duhshasana's young son, Lakshmana, stepped forward flourishing his mace. With renewed spirits, the

Kauravas rallied behind him. The two young boys, Abhimanyu and Lakshmana, were locked in combat. Although Lakshmana fought bravely, he was unable to hold his ground against Abhimanyu and fell mortally wounded.

Duhshasana was overcome with grief. Duryodhana's rage became uncontrollable. Urging his soldiers to follow him, he fell upon Abhimanyu. Then Drona turned to Karna and said, "We cannot defeat Abhimanyu this way. You go from behind and cut the string of his bow, I will take some men with me and slay his horses and his charioteer." Karna did as he was told. But the valiant Abhimanyu drew his sword and took them all on single-handed. Slashing around him with the speed of lightning, he routed his opponents.

Drona was in despair. They had failed to vanquish a mere lad. This was a blot on the Kauravas' name. With Karna's help he tried another trick. While one broke Abhimanyu's sword, the other shattered his shield. Abhimanyu was taken aback but only for a moment.

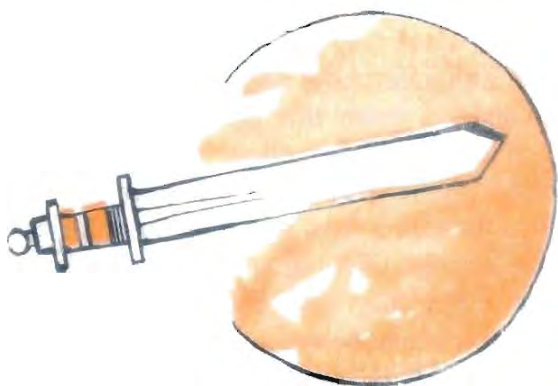
Picking up the broken wheel of his chariot he fell upon his foes like a wounded lion. The Kauravas were filled with admiration. Even though disarmed, the boy was proving invincible. Seeing the Kauravas lose heart, Duhshasana's second son attacked Abhimanyu with his mace. Abhimanyu threw away the broken wheel and also picked up a mace.

The two warriors were locked in combat. They fell but rose to fight again. But by now Abhimanyu was exhausted and could not rise quickly enough. This delay cost him his life. Seeing his chance, Duhshasana's son struck him a mortal blow, and so Abhimanyu was killed.

The Kauravas rejoiced at Abhimanyu's death, except for

Karna and Drona, who wept. Dhritarashtra's son, Yuyutsu, was angry at the treachery and rebuked them. "You have done grievous wrong," he said. "What heroism is there in killing a lone boy? You should be ashamed of yourselves. Woe on you!" And with these words he threw away his armour and walked away from the field of battle.





LUVA AND KUSHA

Outside a little hut in a lush green forest, children were busy playing. Some were sons of hermits, others of forest-dwellers. All were engrossed when they saw a cloud of dust approaching. They stopped playing. "Run! Run! An army is coming!" one of the boys cried in a frightened voice. But no one paid any heed and the boys went on with their games.

Soon a beautiful, black stallion came galloping along. On its forehead it had a gold band with the following words. "This horse belongs to the Maharaja of Ayodhya, Maharaja Ramchandra! It is under the protection of Shatrughna the valiant! Every country through which it passes will be considered a conquest of Maharaja Ramchandra. Anyone who wishes to challenge the Maharaja's authority and refuses to acknowledge him as overlord should seize this horse and be ready to fight the army that is following it."

The boys read the words and one of them burst out

laughing. Stringing his bow he said, "Look friends! This horse has come to claim this forest for the Maharaja of Ayodhya! Why should we allow this?"

This child's name was Luva. He grabbed the horse's reins and tied them to a tree. Just then the soldiers in charge of the horse arrived. Assuming that some child had tied up the horse in fun, they advanced to unfasten it. They had only taken a few steps, however, when Luva let fly a volley of arrows. The soldiers stopped in their tracks and turned angrily towards Luva. Undaunted Luva spoke in a lordly tone: "It is I who have tied up this horse. Anyone who releases it will have to answer for it with his life!"

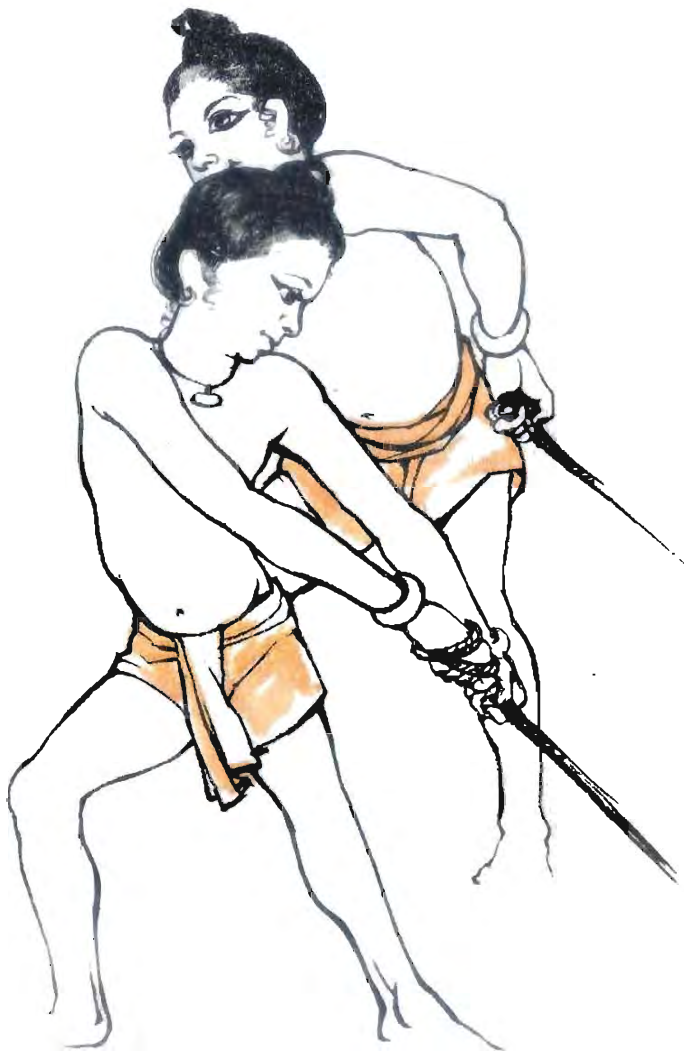
Cowed by Luva's boldness, the soldiers rushed to their commander, Shatrughna. He sent his second-in-command, Kalajit, to prepare for battle. Kalajit ordered his men to take their positions. But first he tried gently to talk Luva around. Luva refused to listen. Left with no alternative but to fight, Kalajit beckoned his soldiers and advanced. He had barely taken a step forward when Luva stopped him with an arrow. Then Luva turned and loosened a hail of arrows on the soldiers. Wounded and dying, the soldiers began to flee. Kalajit now drew his sword and challenged Luva to a duel. Luva smiled, took out an arrow from his quiver and shot it straight through Kalajit's heart. Kalajit fell writhing in agony, and died soon afterwards.

The soldiers ran and broke the bad news to Shatrughna. He was shocked. Taking Hanuman, Sugreeva, Angada and others, he went to the battlefield.

Shatrughna was astounded when he saw the child, Luva, in battle-dress. Luva's bravery left him speechless with



admiration. But on the field of combat there is no room for sentiment. So he ordered his commander, Pushkal, to give

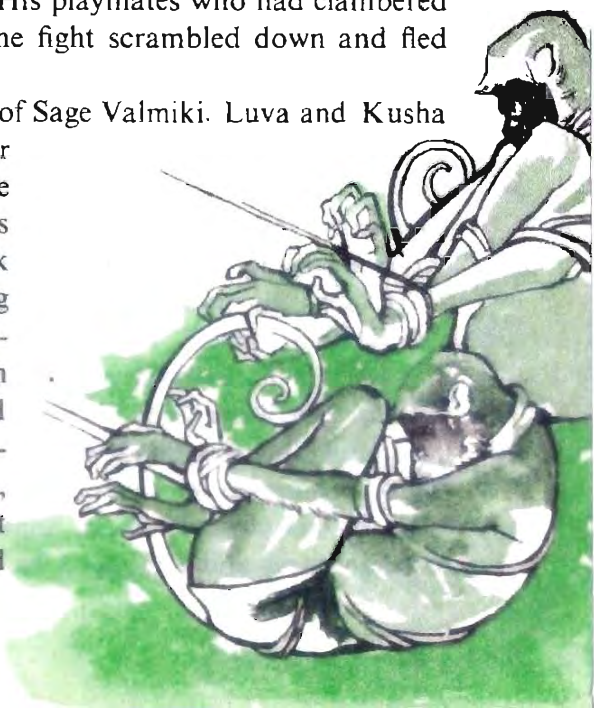


battle. Pushkal was a famous warrior but even he suffered defeat at the hands of Luva. This was more than Hanuman could take. He let out a deafening roar, tore up a huge tree from the roots and sprang on Luva. The child stood his

ground. He loosened one arrow after another and sliced Hanuman's tree into little bits. Then Hanuman stretched his tail and coiled it around Luva. Luva still did not panic. Jumping out of the noose he hit Hanuman hard on the chest. Hanuman fell down in a dead faint.

Now Shatrughna was really worried. How could a mere lad be such a good warrior! As Shatrughna advanced towards him, Luva smiled mockingly. He met him with a barrage of arrows. Shatrughna fell wounded and his army wavered. Chaos ensued but a section of the army made a joint assault on Luva. Luva, however, was more than a match for them. Meanwhile, Shatrughna had regained consciousness. He took the arrow that Rama had given him and shot it at Luva. The arrow struck Luva straight in the heart and he passed out. His playmates who had clambered up nearby trees during the fight scrambled down and fled to the hermitage.

This was the hermitage of Sage Valmiki. Luva and Kusha lived here with their mother, Sita. When the boys rushed in, Sita was busy with her house-work and Kusha was playing near the hut. On hearing that Luva had been injured, Sita's eyes filled with tears. Kusha comforted her, "Don't cry, Mother. I'll go and get news of Luva." He touched



his mother's feet and ran off towards the battlefield.

By then Luva had regained consciousness. On Kusha's approach, he leapt up and the two brothers embraced. Then they got ready to fight. Shatrughna rearranged his army and ordered it to attack. Hanuman, who had now also recovered from the blow, picked up a huge rock and with Angada moved to the attack. Luva and Kusha knelt on the ground and let loose arrow after arrow. Hanuman and Angada were struck down, as were many others including Shatrughna. Between them the two brothers killed or wounded Shatrughna's entire army.

The brothers rejoiced over their victory. They took one last look at the horse tethered to the tree and then began to retrace their steps homewards. "We should take back some mementoes of our victory," the two boys suddenly thought. So they removed a big diamond from Shatrughna's helmet and grabbing Hanuman and Sugreeva by their tails, dragged them to the hermitage. Sita burst out laughing when she saw them. But when they came nearer, she recognized Hanuman and Sugreeva and was very upset. She rebuked her sons and told them who Hanuman and Sugreeva were. Realising that the horse belonged to Rama, she said, "My sons, the horse belongs to your father. You must release it at once."

Luva and Kusha were overjoyed at the mention of their father. "We have been true to the warrior's code," they said. But Sita was filled with anxiety. What would Rama think? Using her supernatural powers she revived the men slain by her sons. By then, Shatrughna had also regained consciousness and unnoticed he quietly slipped away with

the horse and returned to Ayodhya.

According to the custom of those days, when the horse returned safely, a rite known as the *Rajasuya Yagna* was performed. Valmiki was invited to the ceremony and he took Luva and Kusha with him. In the hermitage, Luva and Kusha had studied the *Ramayana* and now knew it by heart. They had sweet, melodious voices. As they entered Ayodhya, they began to chant lines from the great epic. So melodious was their chanting that crowds gathered around them wherever they went.

One day Luva and Kusha were reciting the *Ramayana* when they passed by the King's palace. As usual a large crowd was following them. Rama was enchanted by their recital and invited them to his palace. They recited the *Ramayana* to him. But when he wanted to reward them, they refused to accept anything. "If you really like our recital," they said, "let all your subjects hear it. That will be our reward." Rama agreed and Luva and Kusha chanted the *Ramayana*. Their listeners were deeply moved.

The people of Ayodhya were loud in their praises of the two boys. Their names became a household word. The recital of the *Ramayana* made Rama sad. It brought back memories of his wife Sita.

Valmiki found a suitable opportunity to tell him the true story: When Rama had sent Sita off and Lakshmana had left her in the forest she had gone to live in Valmiki's ashram. Luva and Kusha were born there. Sita was the mother of the two boys. Rama was overjoyed and embraced Luva and Kusha. Their charm, intelligence and bravery had greatly impressed Rama and he was thrilled

that the two boys were his own sons. Sita returned to Ayodhya. The people were filled with joy and welcomed her with open arms.



BHARAT AND THE LION-CUB

King Dushyant of the clan of the Purus was handsome, good and brave. Even Indra, the chief of the gods, was known to turn to him for help. One day, King Dushyant was returning in his aerial chariot from a battle between the gods and the demons. As the chariot slowly descended from the clouds, the King feasted his eyes on the beauty of the earth below. The chariot stopped in front of an ashram. This was the ashram of Rishi Marich. Dushyant decided to pay his respects to the rishi.

Suddenly he heard a woman's voice, "Don't do that, son! Leave the lion-cub alone."

The King turned around. A lively little boy was holding a lion-cub and saying, "Open your mouth. Let me count your teeth!"

Two women from the ashram tried to pull the child away. King Dushyant could not take his eyes off him. His heart seemed to melt with love and he wanted to fondle the child. Once more a woman tried to stop the boy. "Son Bharat, if you don't leave that cub alone," she warned, "the lioness will attack you."

But Bharat made a face at her. "Who's afraid of a lioness!" he said.

The child was completely fearless! It was pointless trying to scare him. Unable to make Bharat realize the danger he was in, the woman said in despair, "Son, if you let the lion-cub go, I will give you a lovely toy."

But Bharat was not so easily diverted. He held out his little hand. "First give me the toy," he said.

Dushyant had been quietly looking on. He gasped with surprise when he saw the lines on





Bharat's palm. Bharat was no ordinary child; he had all the signs of a great emperor. What was he doing in this hermitage?

One of the women spoke, "He's not going to be taken in by a mere promise. I'll go and fetch the clay peacock." And she went off towards the ashram.

The other woman's eyes fell on King Dushyant. Sighing with relief, she turned and appealed to the King, "Sire, please put some sense in the child's head. He may listen to you and leave the lion-cub alone."



The King smiled. "First tell me who this boy is," he said. "He looks like a prince of royal blood."

"You are right, Sire," the woman answered. "Bharat is a prince of the Puru clan."

"A prince of the Puru clan," the words rang in the King's ears.

Meanwhile, the other woman had returned with the clay peacock. She was about to hand it to Bharat when she suddenly screamed. Bharat's amulet was not on his arm. She asked anxiously, "Bharat, what have you done with your amulet? You really are very naughty!"

King Dushyant joined in the hunt for the amulet. He looked everywhere. At last he saw it. "I've found it," he cried, as he bent to pick it up from the ground.

The woman gazed at Dushyant as if hypnotized. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Why are you staring at me?"

The woman pulled herself together. "When Rishi Marich tied the amulet on Bharat's arm he added that if it ever fell off, only Bharat's parents would be able to pick it up," she explained. "If anyone else touched it, it would turn into a snake and strike him."

Dushyant knew immediately that Bharat was his own son. No wonder his heart had been filled with tenderness at the sight of the young boy. Bharat suddenly became restless. "I want to go to my mother," he cried irritably.

"Come, son, we'll both go to your mother," Dushyant said affectionately.

"Don't you call me son," Bharat retorted. "My father is King Dushyant."

As he walked with Bharat towards the ashram, King



Dushyant's thoughts flashed back to the past.

He clearly remembered the day when Shakuntala had come to his court and he had not even recognized her. How could he have possibly forgotten her. Shakuntala had no one to turn to. How the poor girl must have suffered! But why was she at Rishi Marich's hermitage and not with her father, Kanva?

It was in the hermitage of Sage Kanva that he had first seen Shakuntala. He had gone hunting and a deer had led him on quite a chase. Tracking it he had arrived at the hermitage. Shakuntala and her companions were watering plants. Dushyant was dazzled by Shakuntala's loveliness. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. It was love at first sight and King Dushyant resolved to make Shakuntala his queen. Sage Kanva was away on pilgrimage at the time.

Shakuntala also fell in love with Dushyant. They got married at the hermitage and Dushyant stayed there for a while. But how long could a king neglect the affairs of his kingdom? Since Sage Kanva had not yet returned, King Dushyant was unable to obtain his permission to take Shakuntala back with him to his kingdom.

Ultimately Dushyant had to return to his kingdom. So he bade farewell to Shakuntala and the other inmates of the hermitage. Before leaving, he gave Shakuntala his ring and promised to send one of his ministers to fetch her soon. Then he departed.

One day, when Shakuntala was day-dreaming, Sage Durvasa arrived unexpectedly. Durvasa was known for his bad temper. At the slightest provocation he lost his



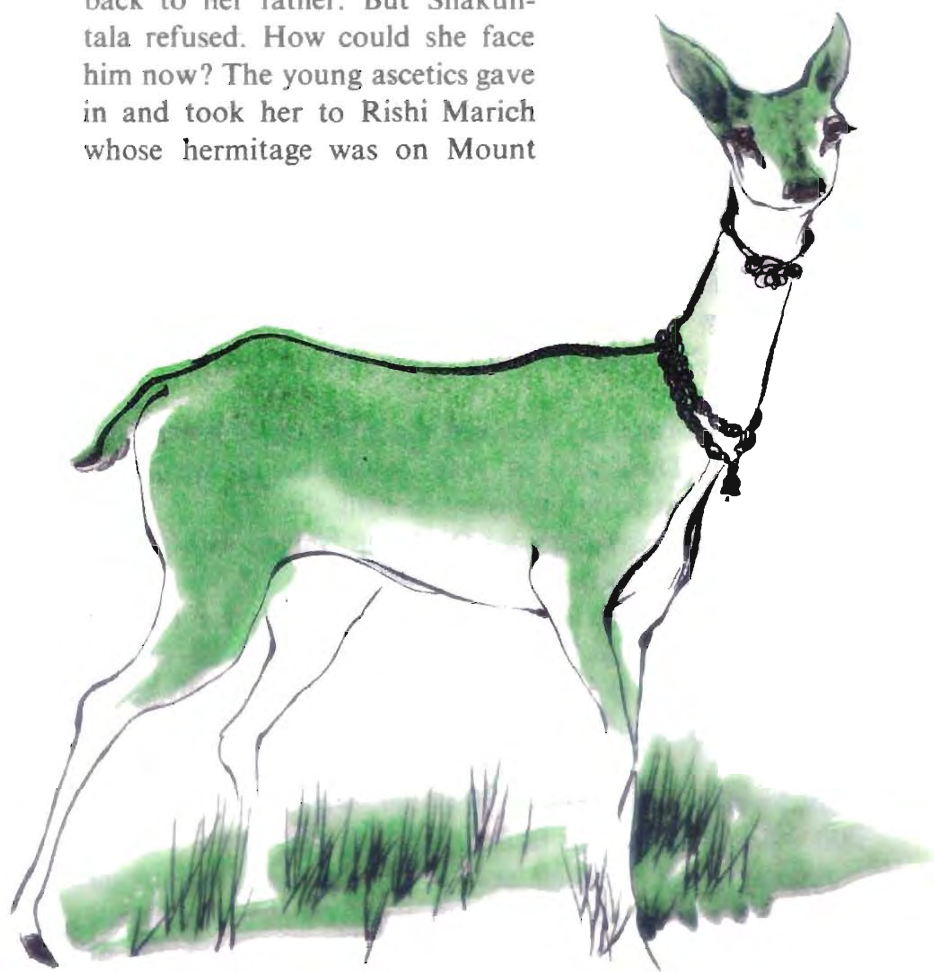
temper and cursed people. Everyone was scared of him. The fact that Shakuntala had not noticed his arrival was reason enough for the sage to take offence. He immediately cursed Shakuntala: "The person you are thinking of will forget you." But Shakuntala was so engrossed that she did not even hear his terrible curse. Her friend, Priyamvada, greatly distressed, pleaded with the sage to forgive Shakuntala. "I cannot take back my words," replied Rishi Durvasa, "but I will make one concession. He will remember Shakuntala if he sees a gift he gave her." Then Rishi Durvasa departed.

And so it came to pass. When Sage Kanva returned from his pilgrimage, he was overjoyed to hear of the marriage of Dushyant and Shakuntala. He immediately made plans to send Shakuntala to her husband and chose an auspicious day for her departure.

Shakuntala felt very sad at leaving the ashram, its inmates and Rishi Kanva who had been like a father to her. She clung to the saplings and flowers which she had planted with her own hands and bade a tearful farewell to her beloved deer. All were in tears when Shakuntala set off with two ascetics to join her husband.

When Shakuntala and the two ascetics arrived at Dushyant's court, the King did not even recognize Shakuntala. Then Shakuntala drew aside her veil. The entire court was dazzled by her beauty; even then the King did not remember her. Shakuntala was overwhelmed by sorrow. Then she suddenly recalled the ring Dushyant had given her. "That," she thought, "will surely make him remember me." But alas! The ring was no longer on her finger.

Humiliated, Shakuntala left the palace. How was she to know that it was Durvasa's curse that had made Dushyant forget her! Her companions wanted to take her back to her father. But Shakuntala refused. How could she face him now? The young ascetics gave in and took her to Rishi Marich whose hermitage was on Mount



Hemkund.

After Shakuntala's departure, a strange incident occurred in Dushyant's capital. A fisherman was caught selling the King's ring in the bazaar. "I am not a thief!" he protested. "I found the ring inside a fish's stomach!" But nobody believed his story and he was brought before King Dushyant. As soon as the King saw the ring, he recognized it. It was the one that he had given to Shakuntala. It had slipped off her finger when she was offering prayers to the holy river Ganga and a fish had swallowed it.

King Dushyant could neither sleep nor eat. All he could think of was Shakuntala. He was filled with remorse. Where was she now? He would not have a moment's peace till he had begged Shakuntala's forgiveness and proudly installed her as his queen.

Then war broke out between the gods and the demons. Indra asked Dushyant for help. It was on his way back from battle that King Dushyant met his son.

Lost in these reminiscences Dushyant walked with Bharat towards the hermitage.

Shakuntala arrived at the same spot looking for Bharat. As soon as she saw Dushyant, she stopped dead. Bharat saw his mother's and King Dushyant's eyes fill with tears. He asked, "Who is this man, Mother? Why does he call me son?"

Shakuntala pulled herself together, wiped her tears and said, "Son, this is your father. Go and greet him."

Accompanied by their son, Dushyant and Shakuntala went and paid their respects to Sage Marich. Dushyant related the whole story to him and asked his permission to

take Shakuntala and Bharat away.

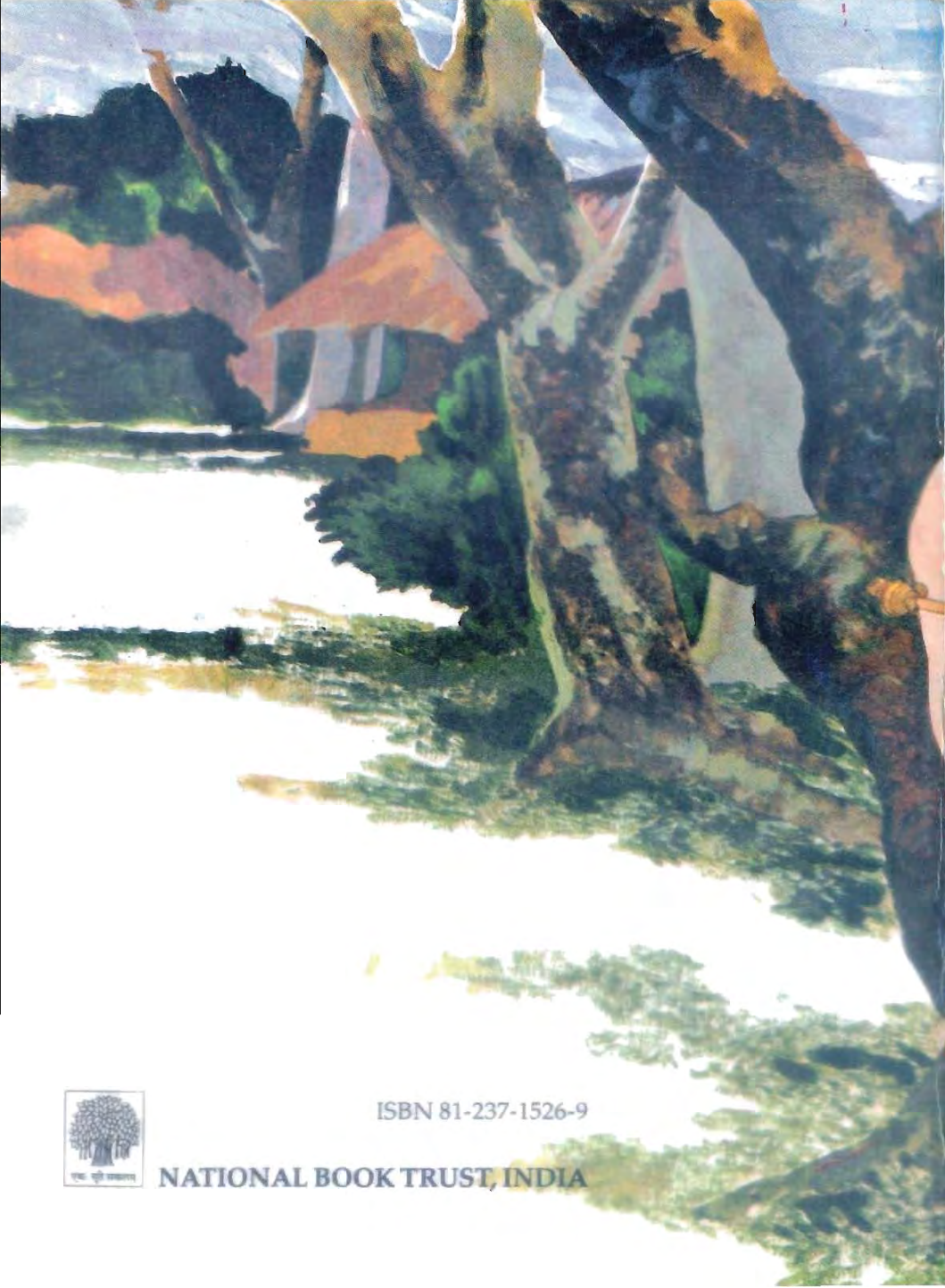
On an auspicious day Shakuntala and Bharat left the ashram. Shakuntala was reminded of the day when she had left Father Kanva's ashram to join her husband. The humiliation she had subsequently suffered, the troubles she had undergone! But today was different. Today was a day of rejoicing.

When Bharat came to bid them farewell, the inmates of the hermitage could not hold back their tears. Bharat was the apple of their eye, the life and soul of the ashram. Blessing Bharat, Rishi Marich said sorrowfully, "Today is a happy day, son. You are going to your father's house."

Then turning to Dushyant, he added, "Your Majesty, your son will gain great fame. Bharat will not be remembered as Dushyant's son; in fact, you will be renowned only because you are Bharat's father. My words always come true. May Bharat live long!"

There was great rejoicing when the three of them returned to the capital. The city was decorated with flowers, and oil-lamps were lit to welcome them. Festivities continued for many days. The streets echoed with cries of jubilation. Money was freely distributed and nobody went away empty-handed. King Dushyant ruled for many years. After him Bharat was crowned king. The same child who fearlessly played with a lion-cub extended his kingdom far and wide and was hailed as an emperor. It is said that it was after Emperor Bharat that India was named *Bharatvarsh*—the land of Bharat.





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